

INTRODUCTION

I got off the plane from California to New York—from graduate school to my first job—and there I was, an assistant professor supposed to start on a promising career. I did not bother to mention to anyone in my university that I was having deep feelings of insecurity and even fraudulence—I identified much more with the graduate students than I did with the professors. Sure, I had been a teaching assistant, but I'd never actually taught a course. Sure, I'd done research, but I'd never had to go on my own from the conception of an idea to a publication in a major journal. And sure, I knew I had to serve the department, but I had only the vaguest ideas about what I possibly could offer that would serve my department, or any other department, for that matter.

My start as an assistant professor revealed me to be exactly the novice—that would be a complimentary word—that I felt myself to be. It seemed like if there was a mistake to be made, I was there ready to make it.

One of my first tasks was to figure out what to do with the \$5,000 start-up money I received. At the time, I was doing reaction-time experiments, so I

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Starting Your Career in Academic Psychology, by R. J. Sternberg

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invested, would you believe this, \$4,500—90% of my start-up—in an Iconix tachistoscope, a device that provided rapid visual presentation of stimuli. This was mid-1975—just before computers were starting to make it big in the running of experiments—and I thought a fancy tachistoscope would serve me better. Iconix was even referred to as the “Cadillac” of tachistoscopes. But computers were making rapid inroads. When, rather soon after I got it, my tachistoscope went on the blink, I called Iconix, only to discover that they were going out of business. There went my \$4,500. I had \$500 left in my research account.

Things did not go much better in my teaching. I was teaching a course on theories of intelligence. I had this brilliant idea that I could write a book and prepare my lecture notes at the same time simply by turning the lecture notes into book format. I was a big hit. My first class session had about 50 students, my second class session about 25, my third about 12, and I ended up with about five. It was a nice example of a descending geometric progression, but it scarcely was what I had in mind to become a successful teacher. In the end, I think my overall course rating was about 3 out of 5, but only because the large majority of the class had dropped out.

I was asked to be department computer authority, meaning that I would do service by assigning money to people’s mainframe computer accounts. But I did not keep careful records and soon lost track of how much money I had allocated, until I used up all the money assigned to the department for computer use early in the school year.

Well, I won’t go on to describe my various and sundry miseries during my first few years as a faculty member, but this book is intended to make sure you don’t have the kind of checkered start I had. You can and will do better. This chapter describes how the book is organized and how it will ensure you get off to the great start of which you are capable.

This book is written for graduate students and postdocs who are just about to start their careers as academic psychologists and also for academics who are just starting out in faculty positions, whether tenure track or adjunct, whether in a large university or a small one, and whether in a psychology department or in a related department. (I used to teach in a psychology department, for example, but now I am in a department of human development.)

A word about myself: I’ve dealt with starting careers in academia from many points of view. I’ve seen it myself as an assistant professor, of course, but also from the standpoint of being an acting chair, dean, provost, and president. I’ve taught at four different universities, and so I’ve seen that although some things are different about starting out, most things are the same. And, as a past president of the American Psychological Association, I’ve dealt with some of the issues in starting out that are peculiar to psychology. So I think I am in a pretty good position to author this book.

The book is organized into five main parts plus this Introduction. Here is how the book is laid out:

Part I, “In the Beginning,” deals with opening issues. It consists of two chapters. Chapter 1, “Before You Even Start,” presents advice on how to prepare for and live through a job interview. Chapter 2, “Getting Going,” contains general suggestions for those who have gotten the position and are just starting out—what they need to do right away, up to and including their first days on the job.

Part II, “Teaching,” explains how one can effectively prepare to start teaching and then succeed when one actually enters the classroom. This part consists of two chapters. Chapter 3 deals with “Getting Started Teaching Your Courses.” It tells you how to prepare for teaching, before you even enter the classroom, and then how to be effective once you get into the classroom. Chapter 4, “Collaborating With Students,” discusses specifically how to work with students.

Part III, “Research,” contains four chapters that address how to get started with, and then be effective in, your research. Chapter 5, “Forming Ideas for and Implementing Your Research,” discusses how you can get started on a systematic research program. How do you get ideas? How do you get going? How do you keep going once you’ve started? What are the obstacles you are likely to encounter? Chapter 6, “Setting Up a Lab,” presents the steps in starting your lab, including getting space, making equipment purchases, hiring people, recruiting students, and the like. Chapter 7 is “Forming Collaborations.” Much research, especially in modern times, is collaborative. This chapter discusses how to form, maintain, and, when necessary, end collaborations. It also discusses what tends to go right in collaborations and what kinds of things can go wrong. Chapter 8 discusses “Getting a Grant.” It briefly surveys your options for getting funded and gives guidance for writing a successful grant proposal, as well as what to do when your proposal is accepted (or rejected).

Part IV deals with “Service.” It contains two chapters. Chapter 9 covers “Service to Your Department and University.” It talks about what kinds of service help your career and what kinds are dead ends. It also discusses both the benefits and drawbacks of service to your department and university. Chapter 10 covers “Service to Your Academic Field.” Service to your field is evaluated differently than service to your college or university. This chapter explores what kinds of service you can do, how you can do it effectively, and how you can ensure that service work helps your career rather than wastes your time.

Part V covers the topic of “Professional Advancement.” It contains six chapters. Chapter 11 is on “Networking”—how you can get to know other people in your field or related fields and use those connections to advance your career. Chapter 12, “Giving Talks and Lectures,” explains how to give

them effectively and for maximum impact. Chapter 13, “Writing Articles,” explains how you can write them so that they best convey what you want them to communicate. Chapter 14 deals with “Departmental and University Politics.” Most of us, especially at the junior level, want to stay out of departmental politics. But that is not always possible or even advisable. Good handling of sticky political situations can advance your career, whereas handling them poorly can set you back.

Chapter 15, “Preparing for Tenure and Promotion,” covers what you need to do to build a case, what errors of commission and omission can hinder your case, and when you should come up for early, or later, promotion. Chapter 16 deals with “Resolving Conflicts.” It is difficult to get through a career without professional and even personal conflicts, some of them serious. What do you do when you face such conflicts, and how do you ensure that you come out of them as well as you can? Chapter 17 identifies “Twenty-One Common Mistakes Junior Faculty Make.” What are the mistakes people make that stymie them so much that, almost regardless of what else they do, they struggle to advance to the next steps? Finally, the Epilogue is a brief final note regarding the importance of other people to your career.

I hope you find this book useful and fun to read. Let me know. I can be reached at robert.sternberg@cornell.edu.